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Oct. 16/01. —

from J. L. French.

A BREATH OF DESIRE

XXVIII SONNETS

B'Y

JOSEPH LEWIS FRENCH

"

*When desire of which mortals are born is flame-winged then is
song seen of men.*

BOSTON

1901

PS 1717

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Gift
Gustave D. Wikosoo
Sept. 27, 1939

*It is not enough to see, though the gift of seeing be strong,
Seeing and song seemed one, yet my lyre was always mute,
My soul rose poised as a seer's to the peaks of the hills of song,
But below an echoless valley smote, like the touch of Dead Sea fruit!*

The edition of this book is limited to 250 copies, printed from types at the Heintzemann Press, Boston, in March – April, 1901. This is No. *183.*

I
LETHE

PALE elegies of dream that court my soul,
Why are ye faithless to the vision's core?
Ye stand like wraiths upon that farther shore,
Where none may beckon for his shapeless dole,
Where neither cloud nor ray of Fancy's whole,
Shall interpenetrate, while more and more
Far-off, resounding, swells the infernal roar,
Of twilight shades where Stygian waters roll.

Oh! lost Endymion, Oh! soundless sleep,
Oh! pale sweet stars, Oh! heavenly mystery,
Why do ye summon when the Soul must weep
In endless years the calm of days to be,
Why does your panoply of joyance knell
All life's desire like to a funeral bell?

II

FAITH

HERE tides and oceans meet, here mighty
waves

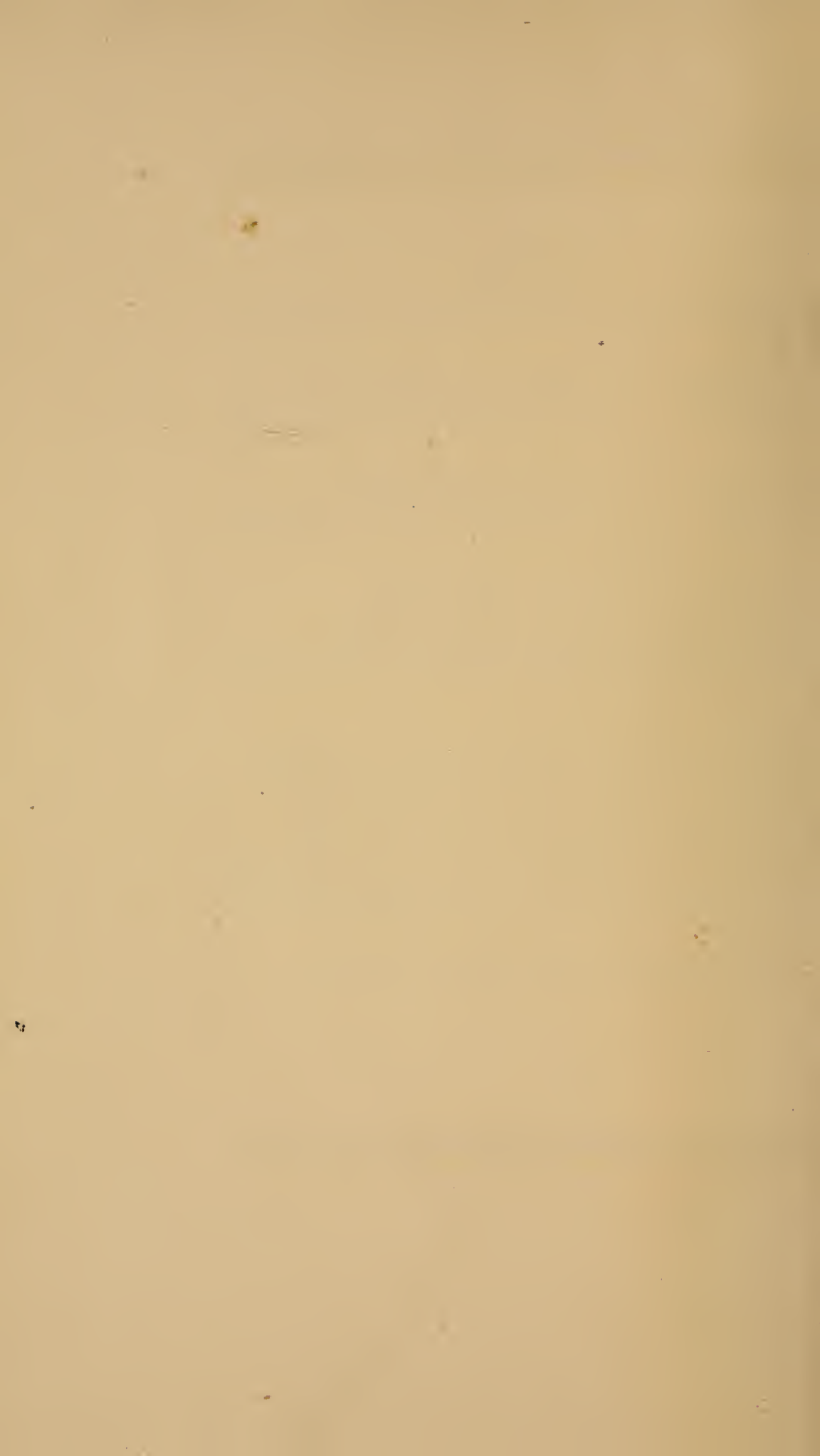
Seek reflux waves that roar against the sun,
Dawn, day, and dark, morning and night, are
one,

And morn and even are as open graves,
Thoughts, hopes, emotions, are the moil of
slaves.

The voice of Life is as a signal gun
Proclaiming that the conflict has begun,
The struggle that shall waste all, or that saves!

There is no gleam; the day star from on high —
The dawn of hope — the resurrection morn
Seem blotted from the precincts of the sky,
And each hour, in dire doubt and stress, is torn
Some fragment from the storm-tossed soul and
worn,

The lorn white soul that seeks a Calvary!



III
JUSTICE

IN weaker years I knew philosophy,
And felt the tiring-hand of Justice fall
Enveloping my spirits like a pall—
Frail mock of men who would be worldly free,
Who seek content as 't were a shoreless sea;
Who feel not ever how the years may call
Adown Life's courts unto Time's Judgment-
Hall,
Who reckon that still no saving word can be.

No message from the great Eternal Gain
May solve such minds; no continence of pain
That seeks surcease in every wave of woe.
So fares life ever; through the years that stain
We mock our toil with this dumb outward show
Of baubles that shall fret the fool in vain.

IV
SONG

“**G**ILDING pale streams with heavenly
alchemy”

I masked in dreams the spirit's outward show,
And mocked my days with one mellifluous flow
Of words that were a whole world's travesty.

I sought in vain the living entity
In that which any man who ran might know,
The careless laughed — wise men would graver
grow,

And wagged sage beards — but still none
answered me.

When Time's pale courts are clogged with
hopeless death,

When centuries their burdens have bestrewn
Heaped up where none may read the deathless
rune,

Still to thy ministry, sweet song, my breath
Is dedicate: the everlasting tune
Reverberate, shall yet inspire my soul
Though ages mock, and planets cease to roll.

V

CONSCIENCE.

WHEN changing Time hath wrought im-
mortal truth
And all my year in full fruition flows,
When back from Death's pale courts, from
Age's snows,
I feel again the pulse of my lost youth,
Though fadeless be the dole of all that ruth
Wherein as some mirage my life here glows,
If there be anything indeed that shows
The hopeless pulse of verity uncouth,
The message is read clear ; — For yet I feel
Through all my days a ceaseless pulse doth run
Outwasting in it's essence e'en the sun ;
And if my earthly mission may not heal
The spirit's penitence, still out of hell
There tolls a warning clear as sacring-bell.

VI
LARGESS

IN conscious eves and consecrated morns,
The soul descries through doubt, the verity,
And sees ripe purpose in the years that lie
Torn, shattered, crumbling on Tradition's horns.
Oh! oft to him whom ev'n perdition scorns
When Heaven nor Hell will hear his soul's
 stark cry,
Comes penitence and peace, he knows not why
Nor whence that gleam that all his East adorns.

This is that dawn whose infinite hopes transcend
All mortal cadences ; whose wakening dole
In terraced raptures wrings his heart past pain;
Not Death, nor Fate, nor Time, may, mocking,
 rend
Who spent, forlorn, divineth yet the whole
Of his lost errantry is immortal gain.

VII
DOGMA

SO long hath Sorrow been my constant guest
And Pain, his grisly fellow, shared my store,
So long I've listened to the fool's sweet lore
That warneth me there is no other quest,
No other hope for mortal's sad behest,
Than that which withereth, faileth, more and
more,
Until it dieth on that farther shore
Where some still fare to find immortal rest.

For yet of these the planets have no strain;
No music from the star's sweet symphony
That falleth like a mantle from the sky
Comes back to heal the blackness of this stain
That poureth from the heavens like ceaseless
rain
To quench this drought in life's sad mystery.

Alfred Bates

VIII

TO M. B.

BECAUSE I have not learned to love a lie,
Because my head with Time's frost is not
hoar,

Because life chases me, and o'er and o'er
My spirit tells me it is wise to die,
Nathless I yield my being with a sigh,
And though some effervescence more and more
Doth rend me with the leavings of this Why,
Yet always in my heart, 'twixt you and I,
There is this question of right wisdom's core.

You counsel euthanasia — from your sanct
And sated soul this warning ever comes,
For me you hear the rolling of the drums
Of the fore and aft, and stare where ready-
ranked

There stand the ministers of that dreadful
hour,

Who seem to hold my body in death's power.

IX
PASSION

OF perfect gold is passion's empery,
Of prayer, and flower and leafage is it
wrought,

Of pollen-gold of the fine flower of thought,
Of cloth-of-gold of heavenly phantasy,
In leafage measureless as the forest tree,
In orison infinite as fair realms unsought,
Saving of him alone the soul distraught
Of time, of care, of earth's stale infamy.

Aye! Kings have conquered for it, and o'er-
thrown

Towers and towns; the boon of one fair face
A nation's moil, a snare to set men free;
For this they wrestled sore, but none hath
known

Its mortal benison of immortal grace
Save him who hath battled with Eternity.

X

HER FACE

THE morning fails, and withereth the rose.
Alas ! that spring should perish with her
sigh !

The banners of the spirit that uprose
On wings of hope to greet the shining sky,
Now trailed in dust across the horizon lie,
And in their stead a train of haggard woes,
A ghastly penitence, a darkling cry
O'er life's wan desert as the traveller goes.

Dawns rise and fail; yet oft for a little space
Out from the dark there leans one face to bless,
An angel seems to hover o'er that place
Where erst before was toil's sad emptiness,
And for a benison in my darkest hour
One spirit shines clear with Heaven's holiest
power.

XI
HEAVEN

OF any penitence the soul may feel,
There is no blessing like the strain of woe
That comes to him whose heart shall never
know

The joys of thy sad courts, Oh, death unreal!
What thought of Faith the stark oppressor's heel
We read the rubric in the overflow
Of souls departed, whiter than the snow
On Hermon's height, souls mad for thy strange
weal.

Yet are we conscious of a finer gain ;
No echo from the errant spheres on high
Comes back to wake our burden to a cry.
We are but finite, and our earthly strain,
Like bees 'mid clover after freshening rain,
Is still one glad song of life's unity.

XII

TO THE UNKNOWN

HOW shall I sing thee having seen thee
once?

Let others praise thine eyes, thy voice, thy hair ;
I chide thee not at finding thee so fair,
Yet still could see thee beauty's show renounce.
I marked thy mien and felt thy spirit glow
Communing with that other by thy side
As " Sister ? Sister ? " still the swelling tide
Of question rose that marked thy soul's o'erflow.

I pass — of thee scarce seen, yet seen no more.
Accept the tribute of one gracious hour.

I cannot call thee, musing on thee, aught
Of all the names Love's phantasy doth boast ;
Thy spirit fills my presence like the Host ;
I kneel afar, a reverence in my thought !

XIII

TO A. B.

IN darkling deeps, my spirit's sepulchre,
I felt a ray that pierced those depths divine,
And "entering defeat as 'twere a shrine"
Bade cease the tumult of the days that were.
Far-sounding thence I heard the dividing year
Call cleaving down the slope where no stars
shine.

I knew the voice, dear life, was only thine;
I heard thy wings and smelt the breath of myrrh.

And yet 'twas song's grace only. From our dark
There gleams no ray but this; Ah! hopeless
here

We strive and sever. In drear ways and stark
We vex our toil with visions of that sphere
Whence beams an orison which none may know
Save him whose heart hath wept the immortal
woe.

XIV
GUERDON

I WOULD when from this clay the Spirit's
fled

And men, my brethren, tell I'm past and gone
Beyond their ken, whiles still they neighbor
one

A wanderer 'mid the mazes of the dead,

That some shall still recall my best estate,
In my dead days discern the thread of gold,
And say "His heart was light though pain waxed
old,

And Grief's gaunt finger beckoned at his gate ;"

That "Once his eyes shone soft with reveries,
"And once his voice told something sweet to
hear,

"And once there glistened heavenly dew—a
tear,

"That won our souls to highest harmonies."

This be my guerdon. — This the fame I seek,
Mine answer when the final morn shall break !

XV

FULFILLMENT

OF any verity strange song is wrought,
Of any hope that mortal man may feel,
Of any effluence of woe or weal,
Of any offering to Time's altar brought.
And yet erstwhile my spirit often sought
For far strange sight, unwept, uncouth, unreal.
The doom that bound sad Ixion to his wheel
Was mine; the while my vision swept distraught
Those darkling realms whence none the spark
may steal.

Song's light is here; the soul's fond offering
Is quenched of woe in no sad realm but this.
The day-star from on high, alas! will spring
For him who seeks a heaven's supernal bliss
Only in heart-hopes that have grown more dear,
As greening leaves that Autumn's winds turn
sere.

XVI
LOVE

I DREAMED that Love a store of secrets
held:

A mighty mystery, — that all man knew
And all he felt were but this monarch's due,
The end, beginning from the days of eld;
That by his mastery he all lives did weld
Into one portion of the days anew;
And yet, afar, amain, one voice held true,
And ever nearer, clearer, still it swelled.

So when I came to read his holy rune,
I saw it was not all; tides of the sea,
And moan of forest trees, and stress of song,
Aye, and things lesser, these though they might
wrong,
Were more than Love to some men, and their
tune
More music than his heavenly symphony.

XVII
ENVOY

WHERE in the twilight terraces of Time
There glows a light of mortal mystery,
Men shall recall one voice and shuddering cry :
“ This were the fool who wrought the foolish
rhyme,
“ The sonneteer, half-demon and half-mime,
“ Who swept the heavens with his darkling eye,
“ Who sought to find the vision in the sigh
“ Of us who weep a God-head’s shallow crime.”

Here where my penitence may not avail,
Where hopes like roses leaf by leaf shall fall,
Where dreams are but the shadow of the pall,
I cry “ Farewell ! ” — and yet “ Farewell and
hail ! ”

The perfect soul shall die — the lost soul, free,
Will wander singing in eternity.

Mark Twain

XVIII
MAMMON

TO M. A. H.

CLEAR-EYED and calm, thou seest that
the years
Have wrought the verdict of the days to be ;
That we have bought with too much liberty
This boon of altars stained with blood and tears ;
That freedom and the recompense of fears
Are but the weakling's boast, the lordling's fee,
Our lordlings of the mart, the land, the sea,
Whose shrine is where the Golden Idol leers.

Come promises of Peace : Come Hope's fair
wile,
These are mirages in thy vision clear,
The effigies of usurers that beguile
With honeyed words alike the slave, the seer ;
Thou like a banner 'mid this western gale
Can'st read God's message where republics fail.

XIX
REMORSE

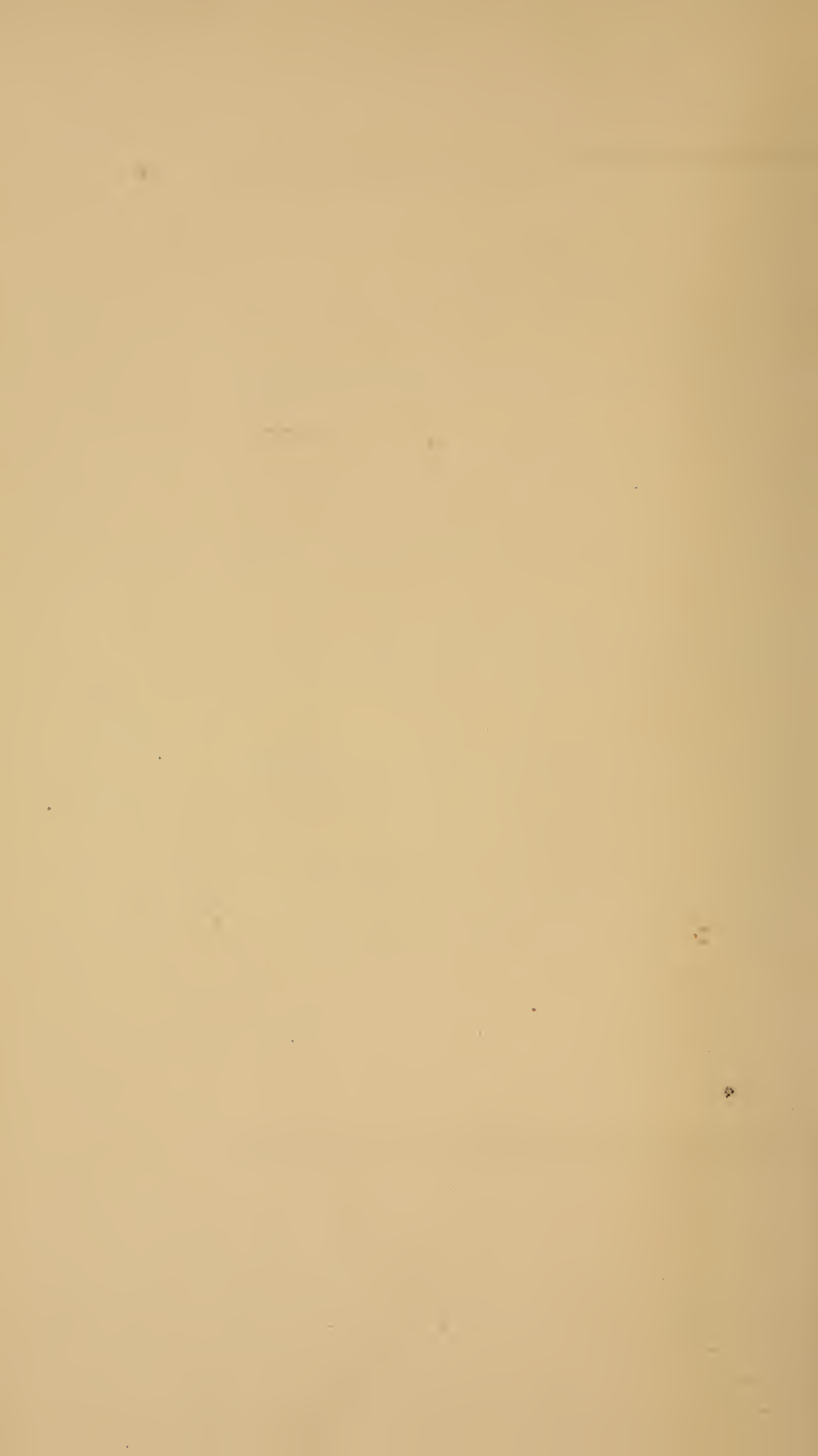
IN springs of being that have cast their
shades

O'er Death's dank deeps to where the spirit
glows

Like to the sun on Himalaya's snows,
There lurks a memory that never fades,
A sense of dole that hardly retrogrades
Though life's strong soul the secret seldom
knows,

Wrestling in vain, until it overthrows
The legions hoar that haunt the infernal glades.

Fled from the dark and doubt to summits clear
The soul looks back in heavenly empery
The regions of its pasture to descry,
And wakes the starry echoes without fear.
Yet still, though ever higher mounts its ken,
It masks the footprints of that noisome fen.



XX

MUSIC

O MUSIC, cease, thou dost my spirit wrong;
Cease, lest the whole of life's strange
symphony

Shall be translated of the soul of thee,
And all thy melting raptures endless throng
In sorrow's sadness all my days along,
Cease! lest my spirit cease in ecstasy, —
The joy of hope, the calm of days to be,
The last fond echo of my hopeless song!

O music, thou art fear and hope and pain
And love's glad pleasaunce, and the saving strife
Of passion; and the lust of days still rife
With expectation; and thou art the strain
That follows madness to her prison cell,
And mak'st desire chime like a funeral knell.

XXI*

HIS OWN

AND ever, and yet ever, these the mock
Of worldly ones, who know not what they
do,

Who sup up peace as 'twere the morning dew
And mark not Virtue's heavenly standards
flock

To succor him whose heart is as the rock,
While theirs as water changeth every hue
'Neath doubt's pale moon that vagrom clouds
endue

Till light and life are but a passing shock, —

They shall abide forever; but the moil
Of worldlings and their vain ways shall endure
As chaff before the thresher, as the mist
That harboreth alone where clouds are sure,
Dark following doubt, till penitence past toil
They seek no benison in the Mouth that kissed
The feet of them that followed, mean and poor!

* A Calvinistic Collect.

XXII

INFINITUDE

TO make one song that shall transcend the
spheres,

Inherit all spheres, and yet wander nigh
Here where the East doth circumvent the sky
Here where God's daylight filtereth through
tears,

To wipe away the sad stain of the years,
To turn to pæan-chant the human cry,
To wrest one coal from off Time's altar high,
One spark that shalt cremate all mortal fears:

This were the birthright of the haunted soul,
The alnage of philosophy, the dole
Of him who sets himself to find the Grail;
But only his the vision, the clear toll,
Who passing Heaven and Hell hath felt earth's
whole
Equation tremble, nor his spirit quail.

XXIII*

REMBRANDT

THAT is the portrait of the Burgomaster;
Turn where you will, somehow those honest eyes

Will follow you about — Strange, is it not,
The haunting charm? — 'Tis but a simple face,
That of a man — The Burgomaster Six.
Who was the fellow? Lord! we cannot tell;
He's known to fame but as you see him there,
The sturdy Burgomaster in his ruff!

He speaks from out the canvas — Aye! he lives
For us again, we know him as he moved
In the grave round of that quaint sober life;
He tells a tale of other times long fled;
He is alive — and here! though centuries dead,
Nay! 'Tis the master's touch that lives in us!

* In the Hague Gallery.



XXIV

TO C. H.

O soul of dull cold marble, light of art,
Thyself the sculptor's dream, refulgent,
free;

Say, what Pygmalion hath fashioned thee;
What spirit quickened thee; set thee apart
To give the insensate stone thy throbbing
heart,

Bid thine own marble live in ecstasy!
The muses named thee — smiled on Destiny
And craved her crown thee scathless from
Time's dart.

Thy soul hath walked in rapture long ago,
A gleaner in the groves of Academe.
To thee grave Phidias his craft hath shown;
The Attic brede hath been thy waking dream,
Art's new Hypatia — for to this allied,
Thy wide-eyed soul hath art revived.

XXV
DESPAIR

OH! that mine eyes could feel that long-sought light,
The dawning of the day that cometh not.
Years have I wandered where I have no lot —
No part nor purpose — In a day of night!
I stretch my hands and cry; my wearied soul
Pines for deliverance from this dull thrall;
Oh! why, my Sin, hast thou encompassed all
The good, and left me but this awful dole?

Black night descends! Is there no recompense?
I tear me like Prometheus in his chains,
God, let thy Son descend and bear me hence!
Scourged by these furies of my soul, my pains
Me compass as with fire — No hope! no light!
Fate beckons with his pall. Welcome Death's
night!

XXVI

TO P. H.

TO find the heart of Thackeray beneath
A Yankee's shirt, to feel the human glow
Of that great pulse that never lilted slow,
That kept in every throb true manhood's faith,
That through all tides of ministry till death
With hope, with joyance, bravely did bestow
His life's broad page with blossomings that show
In fair strong flowers fed with immortal breath.

The loudest laugh since Rabelais and the best.
The keenest point since Junius trimmed a
quill! —

Ah! Attic delver of our brawling West,
In thee we hail this rare succession still.
Like him lives in thy prose's cadenced chime
At once the wit, philosopher, and mime.

XXVII

TO LACHRYMOSA

I LOVE thee, Lachrymosa,—therefore, sweet,
I'll whisper thee a secret, lend thine ear,
A little closer, love, that thou mayst hear,
That thou and I should know alone is meet.
Yet, sweetheart, 'tis an old song; if the world
Do pass thee by and seem to hold in scorn
Those gifts and graces that outshine the morn,
If all thy lovers walk with favors furled
And none do vow, nor waste his soul in sighs,
Nor swear his passion deathless by your eyes,—
And chiefest him thou lov'st of all the rest,
Seeing thee distraught, who mocks thee with a
jest;

This know: mankind is moody. Time hath seen
The blind god fickle even to his queen!

XXVIII

WOMAN

OF her who was the soul-space of my song,
Whose effigy of light through rayless years,
Through front of battle and the clash of spears,
The ineffable energies of my life prolong
Be this the burden, this the evensong.
O perfect peace! O balm! O heart of tears!
O panoply of love and hope past fears!
To thee the sceptre and the crown belong.

When tides shall fail, when droops the morning
star,
When heaven's last sigh hath swept Earth's
threshing-floor,
While grow life's choruses from more to more.
Till Time itself shall echo from afar,
Thou! only thou! shalt live, the dawning's
beam,
The soul's desire, and the aftergleam!

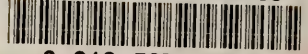
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